

PEE WEE GOLF, GUERNEVILLE
16155 Drake Road
Guerneville
Sonoma County
California

HALS CA-60
HALS CA-60

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

PEE WEE GOLF, GUERNEVILLE

HALS NO. CA-60

- Location:** 16155 Drake Road, Sonoma County, Guerneville, CA
Lat: 38.499361 Long: -122.992794 (Center of Building's Southwestern Edge, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)
- Significance:** Pee Wee Golf in Guerneville is considered to be the birthplace of miniature golf courses that included fantastical figures; a genre sometimes known as "Goofy Golf."
- History:** Since the late 1800s, Guerneville has operated as a small and rustic resort town, taking advantage of its location in the redwoods on the Russian River in Northern California. Amusements for travelers has long been an important element of the town.

According to the website Roadsideamerica.com, a welder named Bill Koplin, Sr. built the Pee Wee Golf in Guerneville, California, opening it in 1948. Bill's brother, Lee, was also a welder and began creating similar golf courses in Florida and Mississippi. Meanwhile, Bill and his son, Bill, Jr., took their style to other locations in California.

The site contains a building with sales area for the golf course as well as bicycle rentals. The top story of the building is apartments and the owners of the park live on the site. Associated with the building is an arcade that is also used for live music and dances; this use was also part of the original park.

In recent years a new bridge crossing the river was constructed near the park, altering the park's relationship with a nearby and now defunct amusement park.

The current owners, Tom and Vanessa Glover, bought the property in 2000. The site had suffered damage from neglect, the floodwaters of the nearby Russian River, and from vandalism. They repaired the elements of the park and moved into the apartment on the second story of the associated building. Every year they empty the first floor of the building of its arcade games, bicycles, golf clubs and office furnishings in case of Russian River flooding. Each spring they host a party where townspeople and friends arrive to paint and refresh the concrete figures.

There are several figures on site that date to the opening of the park; the cannibals are the most notable. Several dinosaurs were added in 1968. This park was the genesis of many other parks, some by Bill and some by Lee Koplin, according to the Roadside Architecture website <http://www.agilitynut.com/roadside.html> and to the Roadside America website. Along with the cannibals and dinosaurs, other concrete figures include ghosts, a gorilla, a bear head, several fish, a turtle, a sun-head on an upside-down body, and several undefined creatures. Some figures were repeated in other parks on which the Koplins worked in later years, although some figures may be copies of the Koplins' work.

- Description:** The miniature golf park is open during the summer months. The site is located on a relatively flat section of town about 250 yards southeast of the Russian River at the edge

of a semi-rural residential area. To the south and east of the lot the land rises at what appears to be a 3:1 grade to about 5' in height; it appears that this land was modified in conjunction with the 1990s construction of the nearby river bridge approach roads.

Large-growing native trees, predominantly Coast Redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), are dotted through the neighborhood and the hillsides that surround the town are densely covered with redwood trees. A concrete bridge connecting the southeast part of town with downtown on the northwest side of the river begins its ascent near the park. A large and simple wood three-story structure anchors the northwest corner of the property. Two overlapping and somewhat rectangular 18-hole miniature golf courses are situated on the south and east sides of the structure. A fenced, grassy lot occupies the southeast corner.

The building is three stories; due to flooding the two story structure was raised in recent years. The ground level floor houses the sales area for the golf course as well as a bicycle rental area. The top floor contains apartments; the owners of the golf course occupy one of the apartments. A third floor deck has a neon "Play Land" sign that the current owners acquired from a fast food restaurant. A one-story structure is attached to the southeast corner of the building. It dates from the beginning of the park and continues to house arcade games. Bands perform on some summer evenings, a practice that dates to the earliest days of the park. The contents of the first floor are removed each winter due to the threat of flooding.

Adjacent to the front of the building is the historic entrance to the park, consisting of a large concrete walk-through tree trunk. It is covered in orange trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*). It appears that most patrons enter the park through the sales area.

Fantastical figures, creatures, forms and plants are scattered throughout the golf courses. They range in size from a curving wall that is about eighteen inches tall to a towering Tyrannosaurus Rex at around twenty feet tall. Each of the 36 holes has some feature, most being the concrete characters, but other kinds of features also exist, such as old bumper cars, wheels, tires, and barrels. In some instances the hole consists simply of a grade change or curve created using concrete, stones, bricks or concrete blocks. Some of the concrete features date from the 1948 opening of the park; certainly the cannibal figures date from that era. The cannibals are two people gazing at a person submerged in a large metal pot; the pot has been mounted on a rebar base. Other figures may date from 1968, including the dinosaurs. Seating areas are also created of concrete and take the form of a large mushroom-umbrellas or a palm, under which is a concrete table. More recent additions include the Grateful Dead emblem on a short concrete block retaining wall near the firepit. The current owner added a rocket with the name of the park painted on the side.

The ground plane of the golf courses is predominantly concrete. Each golf "green" is a depressed area in the concrete, generally angular, and lined with synthetic lawn. Gentle grade changes occur throughout the courses, some due to the continually increasing roots and trunks of the several trees that grow in the park, and some due to natural grade changes. Generally these grade changes are simply covered in concrete; a section that is relatively steep has been modified to accommodate a simple brick firepit. The depressions for each "green" are generally three inches deep and are outlined with brightly colored paint in two-to-three inch bands. In the southern section of the park

there is evidence of a former auto ride; a painted but faded narrow roadway and direction arrows can still be seen on the concrete. The current owner says the three small bumper cars on site now are remnants of this ride.

A figure-eight shaped pond is located near the entrance. One of the holes and a simple wood bridge extend over the center of the pond, creating the effect of two ponds. The northernmost pond features a stone waterfall and small concrete mushrooms. The southern pond features a large mushroom, six feet above the pathway grade, which spouts water.

Other park amenities include several metal posts with lights to illuminate the park at night. Loud rock and roll music is played from loudspeakers near the main building. Several plastic chairs are scattered around. There are picnic tables and simple wood and metal benches, and two portable barbecues are located near the pond.

The perimeter is marked by several kinds of fencing, including wood posts with hog wire, brick planters, concrete block retaining walls with chain link fencing, and solid wood fencing faced with redwood bark planks.

Plants scattered around the park include coast redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), box elder (*Acer negundo*), white poplar (*Populus alba*), Monterey cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*) and California fan palm (*Washingtonia filifera*). Perimeter plants include oleander (*Nerium oleander*), bamboo (*Arundo donax*), yucca (*Cordyline australis*), Boston ivy (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*), ivy (*Hedera helix*), privet (*Ligustrum spp*), periwinkle (*Vinca major*), bear's breech (*Acanthus mollis*). Flowers are provided by roses, trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*), daisy shrub (*Chrysanthemum maximum*) and montbretia (*Crocasmia crocosmiflora*) as well as a few annual flowers. The trees are certainly very old and probably date from the earliest days of the park. One rose near the castle feature is also old, and the bamboo, ivy, Boston ivy and trumpet vine are likely very old as well. All of the plants are species that grow with little attention, important where reflected heat in summer may create a very hot environment and where winter floodwaters restrict regular care. With the exception of the trumpet vine growing over the entrance tree trunk and the ivy on the fountain, the plants do not appear to have been placed to accentuate the features of the park. The park may have been laid out to accommodate some existing trees with other plants added later to fill in the edges and empty areas.

The park is crowded with the holes in close proximity and seemingly randomly placed. The concrete figures area of various and inconsistent scales, typical of this kind of park, and are brightly colored. Throughout the park the character of the place feels home-grown, cared for, quirky and playful.

Owners: Glover, Tom, Jr. and Vanessa.

Sources: Glover, Tom Jr. and Vanessa. Personal interview. 17 Aug. 2010.

Kirby, Doug, Ken Smith, and Mike Wilkins. 1996-2010. *Pee Wee Golf*. Retrieved from <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/10052> on July 11, 2010.

Seltzer, Debra Jane. May 2010. *Roadside Architecture*. Retrieved from <http://www.agilitynut.com/roadside.html> on July 18, 2010.

Site visit, July 17, 2010.

Historian: Janet Gracyk, Landscape Architect, July 18, 2010
Terra Cognita Design and Consulting
145 Keller Street
Petaluma, CA 94952
gracyk707@gmail.com



Near the entrance to Pee Wee Golf, showing the ponds (Janet Gracyk, July 17, 2010).



Typical concrete elements with the arcade and apartments in the background (Janet Gracyk, July 17, 2010).



The 1948 concrete cannibals with one of two ghost visible in the background (Janet Gracyk, July 17, 2010).